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## Ethics of “Taste, Ties, and Times”

The “Taste, Ties, and Times” data set, gathered by Harvard sociologist Jason Kaufman and his colleagues, violates all four ethical principles when conducting social research in digital age, and those four principles are Respect for Persons, Beneficence, Justice, and Respect for Law and Public Interest (Salganik, 2016). The study lacks informed consent to its human subjects thus violating the principle of Respect for Persons. Researchers’ failure to minimize the risks of the study makes it not beneficent. Exposing human subjects to informational risks makes the study unjust. Violation of Facebook’s terms of services causes the study failing to obey rules and regulations. Because the study conforms none of the four ethical principles, it is safe to claim that the study is unethical, and thus I would refuse to use the data set in my research even if it were made available.

In *Bit by Bit*, Salganik first introduces the principle of Respect for Persons, and he emphasizes that “research participants should be presented with relevant information in a comprehensible format and then should voluntarily agree to participate” (2016). The “Taste, Ties, and Times” data set certainly violated this first principle because none of the human subjects knew their daily Facebook usages were web-scraped, stored, and used in a longitudinal study until the study was published and received tremendous public attention.

It is true that “sometimes having fully informed consent before the study begins could compromise the scientific value of the study” (Salganik, 2016). In the case of “Taste, Ties, and

Times”, it was indeed a valid concern that sampled students might behave differently if they knew their Facebook profiles were monitored. Nevertheless, I do not think this issue is unsolvable and I do believe this principle could potentially be aligned. One feasible solution I propose is to provide informed consents to subjects after completing the data gathering process. If the subject agrees to participate, her data will be officially entered into the archive. If not, the data would be discarded. Informed consent is just a crucial part of any type of study and should never be neglected.

The essence of “Beneficence” is that researchers should conduct a comprehensive risk/benefit analysis and then make a judgment on “whether the risks and benefits strike an appropriate ethical balance” (Salganik, 2016). In *Bit by Bit*, Salganik offers two suggestions when undertaking risk/benefit analysis, and one of which is to calculate the probability of adverse events and to infer the severity of those events (2016). When conducting social research and network analysis in digital age, one of the most sensitive and detrimental risks is that the encrypted and anonymized human subjects of a study got deciphered and recognized. In the case of “Taste, Ties, and Time”, the human subjects from the “diverse private college in the Northeastern U.S” was, unfortunately, decrypted and identified as Harvard undergraduates.

Because of this disclosure, Kaufman and his colleagues failed to meet the principle of “Beneficence” because they did not try their best to minimize the risks, such as implementing a better and safer research protocol to better encrypt their data sets. According to Parry, Michael Zimmer decrypted and identified the human subjects used in “Taste, Ties, and Times” archive by looking at those traces of details in the codebook of the data set (2011). Zimmer paid his attention to the factor variable indicating college majors, and discovered a list of distinct major exclusively offered by Harvard College at that time, such as “organismic and evolutionary

biology” (Parry, 2011). Those sensitive identifiers, such as the major variable in the archive, could be easily screened out by Kaufman and his colleagues before they decided to distribute the archive to the public. A simple modification changing “organismic and evolutionary biology” to “biological science” could add another layer of security to the anonymity of the data set. Because Kaufman and his colleagues failed to minimize the risks, the risks and benefits of this research study also did not strike at an appropriate ethical balance point.

According to Salganik, the “Justice” principle ensures that “the risks and benefits of research are distributed fairly”, and it is deemed to be unethical to have “one group in society bears the costs of research while another group reaps its benefits” (Salganik, 2016). The study of “Taste, Ties, and Times” could have aligned with the principle of Justice if the human subjects of the archive were not decrypted and identified. If the human subjects used in the data set remained anonymous, they would become a set of legitimate sample taken from a population of all undergraduate students in the U.S., making both the sample and the population benefit from subsequent research findings using this archive. However, in reality, the human subjects used in the study were recognized and disclosed to the public. This decryption unfairly transferred all costs and burdens to those Harvard undergraduates, while the results of the findings could potentially benefit all other undergraduate students in any U.S. institutions. Thus, unfortunately, Kaufman and his colleagues failed to align the study to the principle of Justice.

The principle of Respect for Law and Public Interest comes from the Menlo Report and “explicitly encourages researchers to take a wider view [beyond human subjects] and include[s] law in their considerations”. This principle stresses two important components: Compliance as well as Transparency-based Accountability (Salganik, 2016). In my view, Kaufman and his colleagues did not comply with this principle when they conducted their study. For example, it is

written in their published paper that Kaufman and his colleagues hired Harvard undergraduate students as research assistants to web-scrap raw data from their subjects' Facebook profiles (Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmer, & Christakis, 2008). I suspect the legality of the data gathering process because if the owner made her profile viewable only to her friends while the research assistant was not her Facebook friend, did web-scrap that persons' profile violate Facebook's terms of service? I think the answer is a yes and thus the study has also violated the principle of Respect for Law and Public Interest.

Salganik provides an elegant metaphor when talking about digital surveillance by introducing a type of institutional building called Panopticon. The principle of panopticon is "central inspection" that the inspector could record inspectee, but not vice versa (McMullan, 2015). This concept of "central inspection" is similar to what Salganik called Master Database in which researchers, having the government and private companies in their back, are able to do things to people without their consent or even awareness, such as observing their behavior or enrolling them in experiments (2016). At the same time, technological advancements, such as big data and machine learning algorithms, are changing and evolving faster than rules, laws, and norms, so there will always be gray areas, loops holes, and potential secondary-use of data. Thus, those research data sets and archives do not comply with the four principles should undoubtedly be banned for distributions as well as be handled with extra care and attention.

## References

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